



"Mr. Klein" and the Other

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Maybe you have to put it in so you can take it out later.

That's right, so you can know it's there, almost. You have it in your life all the time. Certain people don't know what the fuck you're talking about; other people know exactly. And the question is, do you adjust your presentation of your self? And sometimes you do, and sometimes you don't. I did make one concession in *Love and Money*, when Byron says to Lorenzo after the firing squad scene: "I thought Stockheinz paid Blair to kill you. You were the one who paid Blair to kill Stockheinz." It's not anything I'm proud of. I don't know exactly why I did it, except maybe it was an act of cowardice, of saying that, for the story to come together

for people, they really have to see this. And although I really feel that they should have seen it by now, I would estimate that probably nine out of ten might not have, and I sort of have to put it in there. As an aesthetic rule, I think I will always be inclined to do—and I hope will do—what will probably work against me in some ways in reaching large audiences, which is giving in to the temptation of over-explanation. In the piece Truffaut wrote about *Fingers*, he quoted Cocteau to describe its underlying notion. I was unfamiliar with Cocteau's remark, but it was a kind of motto for me without my knowing it was there: "Whatever isn't raw is merely decorative."

PETER MAYER

Mr. Klein and the Other

One of the most important characteristics of contemporary film criticism is its propensity to enlist outside bodies of knowledge to the analysis of particular films. Such an approach is beneficial if it leads to better understanding of a film or puts a neglected film into a different perspective. But such analysis has pitfalls for the theoretician who is unreflective about the tools employed: the analysis can easily degenerate to the arbitrary imposition of conceptual schemata that are really extrinsic to the film itself. Moreover, the explanatory model the theoretician applies to a film should be capable of functioning on the same plane of complexity as the film under study. Articles such as the Dayan-Henderson, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema" (*Film Quarterly*, Fall 1974) do clearly explain the complex ideas of theoreticians such as Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, and Jean-Pierre Oudart, but little indication is given as to how these ideas might be applied to the analysis of individual films. The following article is an attempt to apply some of the pivotal concepts of Lacan, and to a lesser extent Althusser, to the reading of Joseph Losey's film *Mr. Klein*.

Mr. Klein develops a view of the dialectic of consciousness of self and dynamics of interhuman relations which is so complex in its ramifications that the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan can be

profitably enlisted to the analysis of this film. The structure of *Mr. Klein* is deceptive: on the surface, it functions with all the predictability of an undistinguished "thriller" that chronicles the actions of its chief protagonist as he tries to extricate himself from the trap which is being set for him by his adversaries. Brief cuts to the police prefecture and the preparations at the railway station inform the spectator that the plight of the "hero" is becoming more desperate with every minute. However, the film also possesses a latent structure which is in opposition to its obvious structure. In fact, *Mr. Klein* displays the dual structuration of a Brechtian tragedy as outlined by Althusser.

Brecht's great plays such as *Mother Courage* and *Galileo* possess, according to Althusser, a "dialectic in the wings"¹ structure which can be attributed to the fact that there are *two* temporal structures at work in these plays. The temporal structure of the "chronicle" is opposed to that of "tragedy" because "tragedy's time is full: a few lightning flashes, an articulated time, a dramatic time. A time in which some history must take place. A time moved from within by an irresistible force, producing its own content." This essentially dialectical time is opposed to "non-dialectical time in which nothing happens, a time with no internal necessity forcing it into action: on the

other, a dialectical time (that of conflict) induced by its internal contradiction to produce its development and result."² The action which characterizes the surface structure of *Mr. Klein* occupies as it were the center of the stage; the action of the deeper structure has no center and occurs in the "wings" because the real conflict in the film does not take place so much between the characters who are visible on the screen but between characters-in-frame and characters who are beyond the frame, off screen. As far as the spectator is concerned, the characters visible on the screen are involved in conflicts the origin of which must be traced to the deeper and latent structure of the film. Key events in the film have multiple meanings and Robert Klein finds himself in a greater "bind" every time he responds to a change in his circumstances because he misrecognizes (*méconnaissance*) the significance of what is happening to him. In order to elucidate the functioning of the latent structure of the film, it will be useful to step momentarily outside of the film and to discuss the intricate interplay between the "subjects" and the "other" in Lacan's psychology.

For Lacan, the crucial moment in the life of the individual psyche occurs in the "mirror stage" when the human infant "still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursing dependence" confronts the *imago* of his own body in the mirror.³ What the child sees is his body as a *Gestalt*, a harmoniously functioning entity at a time when his body is experienced by him as the locus of "insufficiency" and uncoordination. The role this primordial experience plays in the production of the subject is important to the analyst if he is to understand the essential alienation of the subject, where frustration is "inherent in the very discourse of the subject." Lacan vividly depicts the conflict that is occurring in the very being of the subject.

The subject finds himself engaged in an ever increasing struggle to possess his being, to establish his own identity. He erects defenses to protect his fragile being, he indulges in narcissistic embraces which ultimately leave him disappointed. He becomes aware of the fact that his ego is *his* construct in the Imaginary, that it has been constituted through the 'specular' effect common to the construction of all images. In his labour to construct his being for another, he realizes that all his confidence in his newly constituted being is

continually under the threat of dissolution, because the other, for whom his being has been constructed, can strip him of his identity. This state of affairs is the source of the subject's fundamental alienation. Indeed the ego which is usually defined by its capacity to bear frustration represents the origin of all frustration.

An examination of films such as *The Servant* would reveal that Losey relies rather heavily on the use of mirror shots. In *The Servant*, recurring mirror shots graphically reflect the changing power structure between Tony, Hugo Barrett, and Susan. The usefulness of applying Lacan's theories to any analysis of this kind derives from the fact that it enables us to penetrate more deeply into the inner meaning of a film such as *Mr. Klein* and to appreciate the full significance of its frequent mirror shots.

As Lacan sees it, the individual as subject is involved in a treadmill of alienation, an inexorable drama "whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation." The plight of the subject can be expressed in terms of the mirror stage in the following manner: the subject finds himself "caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body image to a form of its totality."⁵ Hence the subject's *imago* becomes the "other," the idealized representation of a self he would like to be, the source of his want-to-be (*manque à être*).⁶ The relationship between the subject and its specular image can also be described as a conflict in which the subject "identifies himself in his sentiment of self with the image of the other and in the image of the other comes to captivate and master that sentiment in him."⁷

The latent structure of *Mr. Klein* can be seen in terms of the three-way communication of the analytical situation as conceived by Lacan. The dialectical view of the analytical experience distinguishes essentially three "persons": the person lying on the analyst's couch, the person who is speaking, and the person who is listening (the analyst). In the film we can distinguish Robert Klein, his specular image or self, and the "other" Klein (listening, watching, silent). The action of the film can be interpreted in terms of the shifting relationship between these three "persons."

The problem of identity is raised in the very first frame of the film which shows a face in an

MR. KLEIN

extreme close-up. The camera intrudes upon the very being of the person in the frame and then, as it clinically itemizes the features of the woman's physiognomy and her physical characteristics, it participates in her depersonalization. The camera allows no privacy as we see the woman's wide eyes and watch fingers as they touch the flesh of her face and fold back her upper lip to examine her teeth. The camera draws back to reveal the woman in all her naked vulnerability. Next the film cuts to a scene which contrasts very sharply with the austerity of the clinic but the "civilized and cultured" decor of Robert Klein's apartment does not hide the fact that we are witnessing a replay of the previous scene. This is clear from the way we are introduced to this sequence. We are shown a bedroom with its unmade bed and we see a semi-dressed, bored young woman. Meanwhile we hear, off camera, Mr. Klein bargaining with his latest victim. The camera's slow transit from the bedroom to the living-room underlines the sheer impersonality of the transaction and Robert Klein's attitude to his "clients." The man before him is a non-person; he exploits the man's desperate situation and purchases a treasured family heirloom for a mere pittance. When the transaction has been concluded, a brief *prise de conscience* makes Klein offer his condolences to the man for what is happening to "his people" but the *objets d'art* which crowd his apartment emphasize Klein's hypocrisy.

As the man is about to leave the apartment, something happens which precipitates Robert Klein into a labyrinthine journey, a quest where the ostensible object of his search is not what it first appears to be. A Jewish newsletter has been dropped on his doorstep addressed to a Robert Klein. In Paris, in January 1942, such a normally insignificant event assumes monumentally sinister proportions: an aspersion has been cast on Robert Klein's hitherto "unblemished" pedigree and his very right to live has been called into question. The parting of Klein and his client is tinged with ominousness as both are caught in a profile shot which is reminiscent of the shot of the woman (who had been examined in the previous scene) and her husband in the dimly lit corridors of the clinic as they try to assure one another that they have nothing to fear. The man's last words to Robert Klein, "Best of luck to you," are utterly portentous.



Alain Delon in Losey's MR. KLEIN

The film's preoccupation with the question of identity is most obvious from its reliance on the mirror motif. Robert Klein confronts his specular "self" at various crucial stages of the film with obsessive regularity, but what is not so obvious is that the relationship between Robert Klein and his specular "other" has subtly changed at each confrontation. The first time he sees himself in the mirror is after he has received the Jewish newsletter. The look Klein addresses to his specular "self" is filled with puzzlement: up to this moment in his life, he has been smugly comfortable and secure. Suddenly, the very core of his being has been called into question. The next time we see Klein reflected in the mirror is in the café (the camera focuses on the sign "Jews not permitted" as Klein enters the establishment) when he telephones the publisher of the Jewish newsletter. Klein is now engaged in the process of establishing his "true" identity and hence his innocence, for in Vichy France these two matters are inseparable. In the "new" France, one's guilt or innocence is no longer determined by the nature of one's actions but by whether or not one can prove one's "real" identity to the authorities and whether or not the authorities approve of this identity once it is established. In fact, the harder he tries to prove his "innocence," the "guiltier" he becomes, the tighter the net closes in around him. Any doubt about one's identity is tantamount to an admission of guilt. Klein's visit to the police prefecture to clear up the mystery of the newsletter arouses the suspicion of the very people he is overtly trying to avoid. As the police inspector who supervises the confiscation of Robert's property says, it is not the first time that a man has voluntarily stepped forward in order to hide his guilt.

A letter meant for the "other" Klein signed by a woman named Florence arrives at Robert's apartment, urging the "other" Klein to meet her at her chateau in the country. Robert "fills in" for the other Klein and stays the night at the chateau. In the bedroom, Robert again confronts his *imago* in the mirror and then finds out an important clue about his own identity. Florence comes to his room to get the incriminating letter from him and tells him, when he refuses to give her the letter, that he really is a vulture while his namesake and counterpart (Lacan's *semblable*: Robert resembles the "other" Klein in stature; the "other's" dog starts to follow him) is a snake that is "biding its time." The image of the vulture occurred previously at the art auction which featured a tapestry showing a vulture with wings spread and an arrow piercing its heart. We are told that this work was a symbol of remorse and the tapestry does epitomize Robert's dilemma. Like a vulture, he has been preying upon the misfortunes of others; the arrival of the newsletter on his doorstep affects him like an arrow through his heart. His self-esteem is at stake and he is forced to scrutinize very closely his whole mode of being. It is ironical that Robert never meets his counterpart face-to-face. The closest he comes to seeing the "other" Klein is when Florence meets a man on a motorbike late at night outside the chateau. The spectator and Robert take this to be his elusive counterpart since Florence does embrace him and he rides a motorbike (as does the man in the photograph Robert retrieved from the "other's" apartment; the man's face in the photograph is predictably turned *away* from the camera). As Robert watches Florence and the man in the distance through the window of his room, we see Robert's face reflected in the window pane. This scene is typical of climactic moments of the film when instead of confronting the "other" Klein, we just see Robert's specular image and the "other" Klein's presence is felt only by the influence he exerts on Robert. The "other's" absence is more important to the latent structure of the film than Robert's visible presence on the screen.

The scene at the chateau ushers in important changes in the relationship between Robert and the "other" Klein. Up to this point in the film, Robert was involved in a struggle with the "other"

Klein, to find him and to reveal the "other's" identity to the authorities. However, in the scene which follows Florence's nocturnal tryst, Robert tells her that he wishes to know what the "other" Klein expects of him. Whereas previously the relationship between Robert and the "other" Klein has been *symmetrical*, based on rivalry and competition, now Robert acknowledges the "other's" superiority and realizes that the "other" is in fact determining the course of events. Robert has become the *complement* of the "other" Klein.⁸ The communication between himself and the "other" Klein is paradigmatic of the relationship of the Lacanian subject and his specular image: all his actions are addressed to the "other" but the "other" only answers him with silence. The following remarks by Lacan shed light upon the dialectic of their complex relationship: "But if I call the person to whom I am speaking by whatever name I choose to give him, I intimate to him the subjective function that he will take on again in order to reply to me, even if it is to repudiate this function."

The mirror-motif figures importantly in the restaurant scene. While Robert is dining with Pierre, his lawyer, he is being paged. After considerable hesitation, Robert does respond to the call but the person who was paging him has vanished. Instead of finding the "other" person, we see Robert confronting his *imago* in the mirror in a shot which is of longer duration than previous specular confrontations, and which evokes the extent to which his identity is under siege. In the scene which takes us to Strasbourg, the home of the Klein family, Robert's face is seen reflected in the picture which displays the family crests. To his dismay, Robert discovers from his father that there exists a Dutch branch of the family whose blood may have been "tainted."

The change of Robert's status is not only reflected in his relationship to the "other" Klein but also in his relationship to his environment. Before the arrival of the newsletter, he was in control of his own destiny, his victims sought him out and he dictated the terms of their dealings with one another. Now Robert feels at the mercy of events, his life is being shaped by forces outside of his control. Robert's new status vis-à-vis his environment is best objectified in his relationship with

Pierre, his lawyer. He sells Robert's furniture for a fraction of its real value in order to raise the money for Robert's escape from France. Pierre's new role is symbolized by the vulture's head on his walking stick. The tables have been turned and Robert must accept the terms which are dictated to him in order to survive.

Although in the film Robert does not meet the "other" Klein, the spectator realizes that his namesake is really his opposite: the "other" Klein is what Robert *lacks*. The "other" Klein has forged close ties with other people (Florence, the concierge, the girl in the photograph) whereas Robert is not close to anyone; Janine is little more than a mistress; he is uncertain of Pierre's honesty and loyalty and Pierre's wife appears to be Robert's discarded mistress who relishes the quandary in which Robert finds himself. Robert wants to be nothing more than a loyal French citizen who obeys the law of the land no matter how unjust and the "other" Klein appears to be involved in acts of sedition. Robert is an art dealer who regards works of art as nothing more than possessions and the "other" Klein is a man of some sensitivity who plays the violin. But more importantly, the "other" Klein is confident enough of his own identity to assail the identity of another.

The metamorphosis of Robert Klein can be read in the film as a movement *from* rivalry and competition *to* cooperation and complementarity, *from* an awareness of a state of "insufficiency" *to* a state of "anticipation." When Robert realizes that the "other" Klein has been hiding all along in the apartment he thought he had vacated, it looks as though he will finally come face-to-face with his counterpart. But Pierre overhears his telephone conversation and gets in touch with the police who apprehend the "other" Klein. The change in Robert's attitude to the "other" Klein is emphasized by his angry attack upon Pierre for having revealed the "whereabouts" of the "other" Klein to the police. It is no longer a simple matter of finding the "other" Klein, denouncing him to the police and clearing his own name. The search has established a real bond between himself and the "other" Klein. He is no longer indifferent to the fate of his *semblable*: the "other" Klein's destiny is now inextricably tied to his own. Thus when Pierre finally arrives with the precious birth

certificate of Robert's grandmother to secure his release, Robert is more concerned with meeting the "other" Klein than his own safety. As he is herded with the others to the waiting boxcars, quite predictably, all he ever sees of the "other" is his back and the German Shepherd that accompanies him. Robert has not come face to face with the "other" Klein but with his own humanity.

The closing scene at the railway station includes a long shot of the man who came to Robert's apartment in the beginning of the film to sell him his painting. Like this man's, Robert's fate was sealed from the start, and given the nature of Robert's quest, it indeed had to be. In terms of Brechtian tragedy discussed earlier, his search was "moved from within by an irresistible force."

NOTES

1. Louis Althusser, "The Piccolo Teatro: Bertolazzi and Brecht," in *For Marx* (New York: Random House, 1969) p. 142.
2. Althusser, pp. 137-8.
3. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (London: Tavistock, 1975), p. 2.
4. Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self* (New York: Dell, 1968), p. 11.
5. Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 4. Lacan argues that the dynamics of the mirror stage are due to the subject's prematurity at birth which encourages the jubilant identification of the infant with its image in the mirror.
6. Lacan, *Écrits* p. xi.
7. Lacan as quoted in A. Wilden, *System and Structure* (London: Tavistock, 1972), p. 465.
8. The terms *symmetrical* and *complementary* are used in the sense Gregory Bateson uses them: "(a) symmetrical schismogenesis, where the mutually promoting actions of A and B were essentially similar, e.g., in cases of competition, rivalry, and the like; and (b) complementary schismogenesis, where the mutually promoting actions are essentially dissimilar but mutually appropriate, e.g., in cases of dominance-submission, succoring-dependence, exhibitionism-spectatorship, and the like." Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), p. 109.
9. Lacan, *The Language of the Self*, p. 64; Lacan also writes in *Écrits* p. 86: "What I seek in speech is the response of the other. What constitutes me as subject is my question. In order to be recognized by the other, I utter what was only in view of what will be. In order to find him, I call him by a name that he must assume or refuse in order to reply to me."
10. The concept of "lack" (*manque*) can be further explained by Lacan's treatment of the complex interplay between need, demand and desire in *Écrits*: Desire does not result from the appetite for satisfaction or the demand for love but from the shortfall between desire and demand, that is, from the splitting (*Spaltung*) of the two. (p. 287) Lacan also writes that since man's needs are necessarily subjected to demand, and as the message of the demand originates from the Other, his needs return to him alienated. (p. 286)